



REPRESENTATION OF GENDER ROLES IN FILMS: EXAMINING GENDER ROLES IN GURINDER CHADHA'S FILM BRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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ABSTRACT

Gender roles suggest a social construction of a masculine and feminine order in the relationship between men and women. Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* explains how gender roles are assumed by society as the consequence of a constituted discourse, leading to the argument that gender roles are not innate but constructed within a social discourse. Laura Mulvey in her seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) questioned the asymmetry of power between the genders that is dominantly present in films and other visual arts. She attributes this disparity in the distribution of power and the resulting discrimination between the two genders to the presence of the male gaze. Films as a medium for expressing and representing gender roles of a given culture or society, plays a distinctive role in pop culture. This paper attempts to analyse the representation of masculine and feminine roles in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). The film revolves around the subject of marriage and how women's role in society is determined to a large extent by this institution. The paper analyses the gender roles in the film as it navigates the theme of marriage, taking into consideration the influence of both western and eastern culture. The paper takes into consideration how traditional values and patriarchal norms affect gender roles. As Bollywood films face the challenge of true representation of gender roles, the paper also examines the extent to which this assumption applies to this film.

KEYWORDS: Gender Roles, Representation, Culture, Traditional Values, Patriarchal Norms.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender roles suggests a social construction of a masculine and feminine order in the relationship between men and women. The Oxford dictionary describes gender roles as, "A set of behaviour patterns, attitudes, and personality characteristics stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine within a culture." Chris Beasley in his work *Gender and Sexuality* identifies gender as a social process where people are defined by sexual identities. Gender roles can be explained as the roles that society designates to men and women determined by their gender. Social norms and cultural values affect and shape gender roles and determine the perceptions and expectations of how to behave in masculine or feminine roles. Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* explains how gender roles are assumed by society as the consequence of a constituted discourse. It can be thus argued from these concepts that gender roles are not innate but constructed within a social discourse.

Films as a medium for expressing and representing gender roles of a given culture or society, plays a distinctive role in pop culture. As films perpetuate existing conventionally accepted gender roles and behaviour, the representation of women in films is a source of contention for many feminists. In fact, the critical study and protest of the image and role of women and the imbalance of power between male and female characters in films was one of the focal points of the 'second wave' of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Laura Mulvey in her seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) questioned the asymmetry of power between the genders that is dominantly present in films and other visual arts. She attributes this disparity in the distribution of power and the resulting discrimination between the two genders to the presence of the male gaze. Andy Zeisler in her book *Feminism and Pop Culture* describes the male gaze, "Put simply, it's the idea that when we look at images in art on screen, we're seeing them as a man might – even if we are women because those images are constructed to be seen by men." (7)

In a society dominated by traditionally patriarchal views, films are a reflection of these views.

This paper will attempt to analyse the representation of masculine and feminine roles in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*. The paper will examine the gender roles in the film as it navigates the theme of marriage, taking into consideration the influence of both western and eastern culture.

Gurinder Chadha's film *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), a romantic drama film, following the Bollywood film genre, is an adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) about the Bennet family living in England during the eighteenth century. Jane Austen's novel follows the story of the decisions that the Bennet sisters make in their matrimonial quests and the consequences they face as a result of their choices. Chadha's film has adapted the text of *Pride and Prejudice* translating it into a story of a multicultural relationship between a Punjabi woman and an American. The underlying theme of the film like Jane Austen's novel is about matrimonial pursuits and its dilemmas, but adapted to a

different setting and time.

While Austen's novel is set in an England that is transformed by industrial capitalism with the Bennets, Bingleys, and Darcy negotiating the relationship between marriage, wealth, and social status, in *Bride and Prejudice* the Bakshis, Balraj, and Fitzwilliam Darcy assume the same undertakings across three continents that are transformed by corporate globalization. Though there may be cultural differences and set in different eras, struggles between social and individual identity, conflicting views on relationships based on material pragmatism and romantic love are persistently the same.

Although *Bride and Prejudice* is made in the genre of Bollywood films, it takes on a more global approach. This may be explained and accounted for chiefly by the fact that the director of the film Gurinder Chadha is a non-resident Indian, whose films focus mainly on the Indian woman trying to reconcile her culture and traditions with the modern world. The main protagonists of the film Fitzwilliam Darcy and Lalita Bakshi belong to different cultures and nations. Darcy is an American while Lalita belongs to a middle class Punjabi family living in Amritsar.

Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* viewed as a postcolonial feminist film, portrays the women as stronger and more introspective intellectually than the men. In fact, Darcy appears to be given a more submissive role to that of Lalita, while Lalita's role seems to be the more aggressive of the two. When Will Darcy and Lalita have their arguments, Lalita always seems to be the one to come up with the wittier repartees and the last words in their heated conversations. While in Goa and the subject of Darcy's venture to expand his hotels in India comes into the conversation, an argument arises on the true intentions of his enterprises in India. While Darcy sees this as job opportunities for the local Indians, Lalita sees this as another form of Imperialism with the western culture transforming India "into another theme park" (0.26.44) for their own profit. She stands up against what she sees as domination by the west for their commercial benefit at the same time breaking the stereotypical image of the subservient Indian woman.

LALITA. I thought we got rid of Imperialists like you.

WIL DARCY. I am not British, I'm American.

LALITA. Exactly. (0.26.86)

Darcy in these conversations with Lalita seems to be outsmarted and it is Lalita who appears to have more control, dismantling notions of masculine superiority.

Bride and Prejudice revolves around the subject of marriage and how women's role in society is determined to a large extent by this institution. The Bakshi sisters as they reach the marriageable age join the matrimonial hunt for a husband as is expected of them. While it is mostly Mrs. Bakshi who tries to set up her daughters with eligible bachelors, with her daughters complying to meeting these potential partners, they have their own voices and opinions on the men they want for their husbands. Mr. Chaman Bakshi the father is not always in

agreement with his wife and he does not force his daughters to marry the men that they do not want. Mr. Bakshi's liberal outlook in the matter of his daughters' marriage, departs from the stereotypical Indian father image whose word is like the law, to which the family members must abide by.

When it comes to arranged marriages in Indian society, women are expected to conform to the decisions of their family most of the time. Coming from a conservative Indian family, the daughters of the Bakshi family are also pressured to find themselves suitable husbands. The engagement parties of the more fortunate girls who have found their match, become hunting grounds for the prospective brides. Traditional patriarchal customs are reinforced with the women being exposed to the matrimonial market. Undoubtedly while the women must follow the norms of society there are those like Lalita who do not blindly conform to it. In contrast, women like Lalita's friend Chandra Lamba pragmatically accepts the system as she explains her reason for accepting Kohli's proposal: "I didn't want to take the chance in case my prince never came." (01.14.42) Chandra Lamba's role in the film emphasizes the dilemma many Indian women face while living in a modern society. The pressure and expectations to marry well foremost means that notions like romantic love are overlooked for material gain. *Bride and Prejudice* reveals how a woman is identified through marriage and how she has no worth or significance in her family if she does not marry. Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* references this view of how society defines a woman through the institution of marriage: "The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution." (451) Women are not presented on equal grounds regarding marriage, and men generally have always had the upper hand. Simone de Beauvoir describes this inequality between men and women: "Marriage has always been presented in radically different ways for men and for women. The two sexes are necessary for each other, but this necessity has never fostered reciprocity; women have never constituted a caste establishing exchanges and contracts on an equal footing with men." (452) She further elucidates that, "Marriage today still retains this traditional form. And, first of all, it is imposed far more imperiously on the girl than on the young man." (455)

In middle class Punjabi society there is much more pressure on the women to make a suitable match than the men. Men are seen as providers and the duty of a woman is to be a housewife and bear the children of her husband. Marriage is seen as an economic transaction where a woman is expected to bring certain credentials to the marriage and this includes for the wives to be submissive and not to appear more intelligent than the husband. When Kohli, an Indian living in California with a lucrative job comes to the Bakshi household in search of a wife, Mrs. Bakshi warns Lalita, "...and don't say anything too intelligent. You!" (0.34.12) Women like Lalita who are smart and intelligent and who have a mind of their own are not regarded as good wife material. Kohli, despite living the American dream and being westernized still upholds very traditional views regarding his ideal wife. He comes to India to search for a wife because he finds that the Indian women living in America are "completely clueless" (0.37.11) without any roots to tradition. Kohli further elaborates that Indian women born and bred in America are, "all too outspoken and career-oriented." (0.37.21), indicating that he expects women to be docile and submissive, and not be independent. Men like Kohli are the embodiment of the patriarchal ideology, whether they are rooted in the East or West.

Lalita Bakshi the second eldest daughter, is the daughter who has the most progressive views. Although she does not openly question and rebel against the arranged marriage of others like her friend Chandra Lamba, she sets different standards for herself and vocally voices her dissension when her mother attempts to set her up with Kohli. While Jaya Bakshi also upholds the more traditional views on marriage, Lalita is represented as a woman who chooses equality and freedom in marriage. In the film when the four Bakshi sisters break out in song, Bollywood style, they sing a song called 'No life without wife' where they envision what Lalita's life with Kohli will be like as she will have to undertake the traditional role of an Indian wife. In the song she is pictured in traditional Indian attire serving food to Kohli, giving him foot massages, being at his beck and call like a servant. Lalita knows what she wants for herself and she is not afraid to voice her opinions, a trait that a man like Kohli does not desire in a woman. As she sings the song with her sisters she expresses what she does not want in a man: "I don't want a man who ties me down, does what he wants while I hang around." (0.39.17) Lalita is also very confident of what she expects a man to be as she sings: "I just want a man with real soul, who wants equality and not control ... who talks to me and not my rack." (0.41.05) Lalita defies conventional accepted roles on relationships imposed by a traditional patriarchal society. In her work *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan had mentioned this matter of women reduced to being sexual objects with no individual identity, and playing submissive roles in their lives. Lalita is intelligent, speaks her mind and is not ready to enter a relationship where she becomes a mere subservient housewife.

In *Bride and Prejudice* only a man like Darcy can meet the fulfillments of Lalita, intellectually and emotionally. Kohli with his conservative patriarchal views is rejected by Lalita while Wickham deceives her, thereby proving that he is not good enough for her. The encounters between Lalita and Darcy in the beginning

are fraught with friction, as they spar with words like dueling partners. Darcy appears to be arrogant and rude as he makes condescending remarks that appear to be racist. The hostility that arises between them is a result of cultural misunderstanding between them, both being from different cultures of the East and West. Lalita resents his tactless remarks on India and his impression of Indian women which are based on his ignorance of the Indian culture. Lalita's resentment stems from Darcy's ignorant and rude comments on Indian culture. She interprets his arrogant behavior as imperialistic bullying and domination and as a woman she resists what she perceives as an attempt to subjugate her. She stands her ground, speaks her mind, and never accepts his words. However, Lalita's opinions and feelings towards him begin to change the more they interact with each other. Darcy at times appears to be lost and less in control of situations than Lalita, especially when he is in India. Regarding power relation between the two genders, the reason power resides with Lalita in India is Darcy's unfamiliarity with the country and its culture. He makes one faux pax after the other as Lalita mocks his ignorance of the Indian culture and this ignorance translates as insensitive on Darcy's part. But when Darcy meets Lalita on his territory in his country the relationship becomes more equal as they soon develop mutual understanding between them. In the end Darcy becomes the prince who helps Lalita rescue Lakhi from the clutches of Wickham and in turn Lalita turns to Darcy for help as she is aware that she cannot go after Wickham alone. Stereotypical gender roles are assumed where the man comes to rescue the damsel in distress and ends up with the trophy of marrying her. At the same time, Lalita is not the typical helpless woman who needs a man to rescue her. She is outspoken, not afraid to stand up for her beliefs and determinedly knows what she wants and expects in a man. The feminist voice is heard in Lalita who wants equality and freedom in marriage. She wants a man to hear what she has to say, a man who talks to her and not her "rack." (0.41.34) From their interactions we can see that Darcy will be the man who fulfils these requirements of Lalita.

Like all other forms of visual arts the film uses symbols to convey its message. One of the notable use of symbols concerns the use of nudity and clothing as a significant signifier of identity and gender roles in society. Balraj's sister Kieran, an Indian settled and living in London, wears revealing clothes in the film, in complete contrast to the conservatively dressed Indian woman around her. Although she is of Indian descent Kieran is fully westernized and she possesses more freedom to exhibit herself without shame or embarrassment. She embodies the West with its more liberal thinking compared to the East. An instance of nudity being a signifier of identity is the pool scene in Goa. Kieran is seen lounging on deck chairs by the pool wearing a skimpy two-piece bikini barely covering her naked body while Lalita emerges from the pool after a swim, immediately covering herself with a towel so that nothing of her body is revealed. Kieran flaunts her body even asking Darcy to apply lotion on her body. Kieran has no inhibitions and showing skin represents the more freethinking nature of the west. From a feminist standpoint she represents a break away from the patriarchal code and her nudity represents this freedom. Lalita does not want to conform to traditional and conservative thinking, yet her avoidance of showing her skin indicates the virtuousness that is expected of Indian women.

Generally, women in Indian cinema fall into a clear-cut dichotomy of the role of the girlfriend or wife and the other woman known popularly as the 'vamp'. As the lead female character of the movie, Lalita is headstrong, vocal about her opinions and is not afraid to challenge men like Darcy or Kohli. Consequently the role of Lalita fits more the western concept of the heroine. At the same time her conservative clothes and the reluctance to show skin is a prominent factor that makes her character fit the accepted norm of the Indian heroine. It is noteworthy that when Lalita is with Darcy in America or London she wears western clothes like a dress or jeans. Away from India and the conservative expectations imposed on her, she finds the freedom to express herself and her clothes are a manifestation of this freedom. Kieran, in Indian films fits the description of the other woman or the 'vamp'. Showing skin and dressing uninhibitedly points towards the image of the fallen woman. Out of the Bakshi sisters, the youngest sister Lakhi is the sister who is the most fun loving and flirtatious. She falls in love with Wickham and has a secret rendezvous with him. In the beginning of the film she is pictured wearing a scantily clad, scarlet Indian dress with her belly exposed, a hint at her promiscuousness. The more revealing the clothes it appears that the women become less virtuous and the more conservative the clothes are women embody honor and purity.

Films can be considered as a social spectacle, reflecting the society. Gender roles play important part in the narratives where the roles enacted by the genders are a result of cultural constructions in interactions and structures that occur in social situations. *Bride and Prejudice* follows the Bollywood genre but is filmed primarily in English, with a few Hindi and Punjabi dialogue and it encompasses multi cultures in a global world. The film has an international platform but expresses Indian culture and sentiments at the same time. Indian films have been charged of being larger than life and not being true representations of people. The book *Mother Maiden Mistress* gives us a picture of Indian films: "Women characters in Hindi cinema are still regarded as 'entertainment'... If one finds women characters insubstantial, the men are overdone, with larger than-life machismo in plots that are fantastical and often mediocre. When it is difficult to find a subtext to male protagonists, who dictate the box office, looking for an evolved and honest representation of a female protagonist can well be an exercise in futility." (240) The question that arises is, does *Bride and Prejudice* give a true

representation of the genders and their roles? Films are meant mainly for entertainment and education at times. Chadha's film entertains, fulfilling the criteria of Bollywood films with its fair share of songs and dance scenes, fight scenes, comedy and a kaleidoscope of different backgrounds and sets. Yet amid the colorful scenes the film reflects on the universal subject of marriage, a serious matter in all cultures whether of the East or West. As the men and women in the film navigate the challenges and dilemmas of marriage, the roles they navigate are influenced by societal dictates and traditional ideals, western values and eastern values clashing at times, but ultimately finding a way to compromise.

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